

PROSPECT,

OR

View of the Moral World,

BY ELIHU PALMER.

VOL. I.

SATURDAY, March 17th, 1804.

No. 15.

Comments on the sacred writings of the Jews and Christians: Genesis, Chapter the eleventh.

TOWER OF BABEL.

THE more we examine Divine Revelation, the more we shall discover that it is full of fiction and extravagance. In this chapter, there is a wild and marvellous project set on foot for building a city, and a tower whose top should reach to heaven. Those people must have had very strange ideas of the distance between earth and heaven, when they conceived the lofty plan of erecting this lofty and exalted tower.

It is said to have been upon the plains of Shinar, that this wandering people formed the mighty scheme, and it was there they actually set about collecting the materials for the accomplishment of this great object, and the completion of this superb and magnificent building. "And they said, go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly; and they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, go to, let us build us a city, and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven;" to what point in the heaven they intended to go it is not said; if to the sun, then they would have to build their tower ninety-five millions of miles high, for this is the distance between the sun and the earth. But to give them a fair chance, since the job's a heavy one, we will suppose they intended to carry it only to the moon; this is sixty semidiameters of the earth, or about two hundred and forty thousand miles. Let any one calculate the quantity of materials, the portion of labour, and the length of time necessary for the accomplishment of such a work, and he would be inclined to believe that God Almight-

ty was not quite so much alarmed as he is represented to have been according to this account—but more of this hereafter. At present let any one reflect upon the folly of the scheme in regard to time and distance. Suppose they had reared their tower half way to the moon; then the men carrying brick and mortar, must have travelled an hundred and twenty thousand miles with each load, and the same distance back to earth after the next load; one turn up and down would have taken each labourer more than thirty years, travelling at the rate of twenty miles a day; besides, what they were to do for water, provisions, &c. on the road, must be left for bible-makers and inspired men to explain. But suppose all these difficulties to be surmounted, a new one would arise when they approached so near the heavenly bodies, as to feel more forcibly the power of attraction from that quarter than from the earth; in this case, men, brick, and mortar, together with all their tools and other materials, would fly off in a direct line to the moon, and forever prevent the completion of this wonderful project; the folly and impossibility of the thing stamp the story with a character, which ought to make christian believers ashamed of calling such stuff Divine Revelation. But God, it is said, came down to see the city, and the tower which the children of men builded; he could not see where it was—it was necessary to make a journey from heaven to earth, in order to discover what plots and conjurations were going on against him. This revealed system of religion will never cease to represent the creator as a jealous God, full of apprehensions for his safety, and terrified at the designs of those poor feeble mortals, of whose existence he was himself the author. “And the Lord said, behold, the people is one, and they all have one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Can any man of common sense believe it was necessary for God to confound the language of any people to prevent an invasion of his celestial dominions? what nonsense is this, and how inconsistent with the perfections of him who holds in his hands the sceptre of the universe! one would suppose that the writer of this chapter believed that these Babel-builders intended to take heaven by storm, dethrone the Creator, and seize upon the government of the world;—and they make God in his apprehensions conform to this contemptible idea. One remark further is necessary, and this chapter of revealed extravagance may be passed over. In the

first verse of this chapter it is said, that the whole earth was of one language and of one speech; but if we turn back to the tenth chapter, we shall find mention is made of different tongues. By what means these different languages became so soon consolidated into one, must be left for the pious and learned believers of christianity to explain. This book of God, this book of divine revelation, is remarkable for inconsistencies; but God's ways are not like our ways—and so there is an end of the matter.

A Letter concerning the Deists in Bohemia.

VIENNA, Aug. 18, 1783.

THE accounts I promised to send you concerning the Deists in Bohemia, and which at last you now receive, are obtained from such good authority, that I have no need to fear they can ever come too late.

Upon the publication of the emperor's letters-patent for a general toleration, * two and fifty families of the two adjoining villages of Rockitno and Chwoynetch, in the Chrudimer circle, presented themselves before the chief magistrate of the district, and delivered to him their confession of faith, in which they rejected the divinity of Christ, and solemnly declared themselves of the religion of God, (Boguvera), or as they explained it, the religion of one only God.

Bishop Hay of Konigsgrätz, who distinguished himself from the clergy of his rank like a star between the clouds, ordered these people to be assembled in the chancery office at Pardubith, where he discoursed with them for several hours, exerting all his powers of sagacity as well as the whole force of his eloquence: in order with the former to penetrate into the prime origin of these their notions, uncommon and unthought of among the country-folks in general, and with his eloquence persuade them, if not to the catholic, at least to some one of the christian professions tolerated in the country.

They heard him with the greatest composure; but their answer always was: that their reason revolted against the mysteries of the christian religion, and that they could not believe what was contrary to their reason.

*Green's Diary 162. • Joseph II.
 Moly's Review Lond. 1785—Vol. 8. 231. X, III.
 Cook's Selections from Foreign Lib. Journals.
 I. 330*

The bishop asked them: Whether they comprehended how their corn grew? Whether they comprehended the numberless mysteries of nature? and whether these were therefore the less true?—Whether, after the example of so many princes and great ones of the earth, so many learned and enlightened men, after the example of all Europe, who confess the cross of Christ, they could not be silent concerning the mysteries, and perform their adorations in private, in order to pass their days in peace?

“Kings and princes, returned they, the great ones and rulers of the people, thousands and tens of thousands think as we do; but they keep silence, and are therefore more prudent; we speak out, and are therefore the more honourable.”

Their confession of faith consists nearly of the following articles: “They believe and adore one God, the creator of heaven and earth; but do not believe in a trinity, which they consider as polytheism; they receive and admit the history of Christ, as they do the history of a Huss and several others of a like nature; they believe he was just so, and no otherwise, a son of God, as they themselves are his sons; for all mankind, but principally the virtuous and pious, are creatures and children of God. But a God become man, they can as little believe as a man become God. In the spirit of God they believe, just as they believe that every man has his own spirit; that the divine spirit is for them the spirit of good counsel and of strength, it guides and comforts them; but that this spirit is a separate person in the deity, they can no more believe than that their spirit forms another person in them. They believe the soul of man to be immortal. The innocent and good men that are harrassed and tormented in this world, will in the other receive their reward; they will everlastingly love and be with God. The eternity of hell-torments they do not believe; they say it is in direct opposition to the infinite mercy of the best of fathers. The sinner, according to the greatness of his offences, will be chastened or destroyed.

“Their law book they say is the ten commandments. God wrote them with his finger on the tables of stone, and at the same time on the hearts of all mankind. They say their worship, for the virtuous, is that fine prayer of the christians, the Pater noster, which they learn in their youth; for the sinner, who has to reconcile himself with God, the psalms of David, which they sing together in their assem-

blies, and never without feeling, remorse, and contrition of heart."

On the bishop's objecting to them: that they had however been baptized; that they submitted their children to this sacred rite; that they celebrated their marriages under the sanctions of their oaths founded on the mysteries of the christian religion; that there was accordingly a contradiction in their principles: they gave him for answer: "That they were baptized, because, as children, they had no power to refuse themselves to the usage: they let their children be baptized, because the laws of their country and regularity enjoined it, and so likewise they conformed in their marriages and other contracts: but, in fact, they thought as little of baptism as of original sin; and they firmly believed, that nothing was requisite to everlasting happiness, but the belief in one God, and the keeping of his ten commandments. All the rest they affirmed was of human invention, which they never would admit for divine."

This confession of faith, three men, who spoke in the name of the congregation, delivered to the bishop in their rude mother-tongue, point for point. The doctrine of the One sole God they proved from various texts of the old testaments and the new. From the apocalypse they quoted some prophecies and other passages that mention the downfall of old Babylon (which name they apply to tritheism) interpreting them in their favour, live as brethren, and exhort one another in a sort of enthusiasm to persevere in their persuasion.

Several of them, who were heard apart touching their confession of faith, with perfect presence of mind made answer: "Our belief is in One only God, and our law consists in few words: *Cuin dobrzu, a warug sezleho*, i. e. *Act well, and avoid evil.*"

According to the testimony of the parish-priest and the senechal, these people formerly used to commit depredations in the forests by cutting down timber trees for their own uses. But this they did upon principle. The Lord, said they, causes the forests and trees to grow before our houses: why should we not make use of this his bounty, when we are in want of it? But that ever since they made a declaration of their confession of faith in the official chancery, they had forsaken their wood-thievery, and were generally remarkable for quiet behaviour and good morals.

Their notions of government differ not less from the usual tenets. "Mankind, say they, elected their own princes. They are bound to protect us, and we ought to obey them when they do their duty by us. It is a human fiction, that the ruler, particularly they who abuse their authority, are appointed directly by God.

These families have since been transported into Transylvania, because their sect was thought dangerous to morality, to the peace of the country, and especially to the rest of the country people who are lukewarm as ignorant in the christian religion; and because, as was pretended, they were addicted to proselyting, and sought to increase their party, in their families by persecution, and from the other congregations by seduction.

The bishop in his report, ascribes the main cause of this defection from what is commonly called christianity, to the old intolerance of the priests and the laws, and the dry and dull discourses of the curates. He justly holds it to be impossible that men in their sober senses* can allow themselves so far to be imposed upon as to take for the word of God and the doctrine of the fathers, a string of miraculous tales and the other trash of which the doctrine of the monks consists, under which moreover self-interest is always peeping out. Such christians, continues this reverend philanthropist, must be so much the more suspicious, when they see insensible pastors, who look more to the wool than to the weal of their sheep, throw firebrands at every doubt, in order to torment their children; stigmatize them as heretics, blast their name by excommunications, and make them pine away in dreadful dungeons. A grievance under which the country-people of Bohemia for a long time past have had the misfortune to labour.

More of the like deists have since made profession before their proper officials; and this sect having mostly taken root among the ignorant and discontented, would probably have been gaining ground from day to day, had not the monarch bethought himself of methods for reducing both them and their accusers to silence.

At present nothing more is heard of them; and the wise precautions of the emperor proceed without impediment.

* His expression is, *well-organized men*.

REMARKS BY MR. WIELAND.

THE reflections that must croud upon the mind of every thinking reader, on perusing this credible though too uncircumstantial account, are in no need, it is to be hoped, of any obstetrical assistance. We will only take the liberty to offer a few questions to the common sense of our readers, of whatever party, religion, or tribe they may be. What is the toleration about which there has been so much writing and noise in our days? Is it merely the arbitrary favour of a monarch who can do whatever he will—or a duty arising from an unalienable right of man, the right to liberty of conscience? Have they who profess themselves to be of the Augsburg, or the Helvetic confession, an other and better right to be tolerated than the general right of every man, by virtue whereof he cannot be compelled by outward acts to declare that to be true which he is persuaded in his mind to be conceit and error? Does the law of nature allow the setting bounds to liberty of conscience? And (if any one should think he may reply to this question in the affirmative) whereon can this right of setting bounds to liberty of conscience be founded? What is a liberty which may be confined within as narrow bounds as he chuses who has the authority in his hands?

Methinks all these questions are easily to be answered. What decides in this matter is either ratio status, or common sense. If the former, and it depends solely on the will of a ruler, or on his opinion of political conveniency, whether the persons who live under his government ought, or ought not, to have liberty of belief or conscience; then it is clear that it also depends on his will, to revoke the imparted liberty, whenever his judgment concerning what he holds to be compatible with his political interest, shall alter. Let who will rejoice in such a liberty!—But, to speak roundly and honestly on the subject, it is absurd to say, “that liberty of belief depends on any man’s will.” It is an universal, inborn, unalienable right of human nature. He that has the right to fetch his breath, to see with his eyes, to go upon his feet, &c. he has also the right to believe what he believes, and is not obliged to give any man an account of his belief. All religions are grounded upon opinion and belief. Were they grounded on mathematical certainty, on complete and palpable evidence, then there would never have been more than one sole religion in the world. As this is not the case, then has every man the right to be of that opinion, in reli-

gious matters, i. e. in all that concerns his belief in the Supreme Being and his relation towards him, of the truth whereof he feels himself convinced, and whereby his mind and conscience are composed. The man that has other religious opinions cannot indeed fail of believing that the former is mistaken; he is even at liberty to acquaint him with his opinion: but he has no right to force him to his opinion. The legislator in any civil society has no right to do this. He has no right to establish any religion by compulsory laws, and none to hinder or suppress any by compulsory laws. The established religion is nothing more than the religion of the majority; and the epithet dominant connected with religion is complete nonsense. For no religion can have a right to dominate over another. The ruler, as sovereign of the state, is protector and overseer of religion. The former he is inasmuch as the general duty is incumbent on him, to protect every member of the state in all his rights, i.e. not to permit that he be deprived of their enjoyment, or disturbed in it. He is therefore obliged to protect every individual in that religion which he has; and if two hundred religions were to start up at once in his dominions, all the two hundred have equal right to his protection: But he is likewise overseer of religion; in so far as he is obliged to prevent the inward security or quiet of the state from being disturbed by a spirit of making converts, a spirit of persecution and other sallies of a mistaken zeal, or from the tempers of men misguided by the arts of priests and levites; and by virtue of this regal duty, he may—not punish opinions, as crimes—but forbid actions, which, by a natural consequence would disturb the tranquility of the state. Whoever, then, in contempt of the laws, shall proceed to commit such actions, may be punished for his disobedience: But should these actions be of such a kind, that the transgressor of the law held himself bound in his conscience to do them; that is, in other words, should believe himself to be in that case “where we must obey God rather than man:” then is he not punishable for disobedience; and the utmost penalty incurred, would be, to be obliged to withdraw, with all his property, from the country.

(To be Continued.)

NEW-YORK:

PRINTED and published by the editor, at No. 26 Chatham-street, price 2 dollars per annum, one half paid in advance every six months.